

After experiencing some openings in 2013, the Kyrgyz media landscape appeared to take a step back in 2014 as the authorities advanced a series of bills that could further restrict speech and attempted to block a popular news website. Access to a diversity of news sources, and particularly to Uzbek-language media, continued to be a challenge.

## Legal Environment

The constitution and the country's laws guarantee the freedoms of speech and the press, but observance of these guarantees is inconsistent. Kyrgyzstan became the first state in Central Asia to decriminalize libel in 2011, though insult of public officials remained a criminal offense. In May 2014, President Almazbek Atambayev signed into law an amendment to the criminal code that prescribed up to three years in prison for falsely and publicly accusing a person of committing a crime. International observers and press freedom organizations criticized the law for effectively recriminalizing libel. Civil suits also continued to be used against journalists. In August, the State Committee for National Security (UKMK) sued independent journalist Shohruh Saipov for an online article he wrote in May about security officials' alleged involvement in extortion. The agency sought 1 million soms (\$19,000) in damages for defamation, though the suit was dropped after the news site that published the article, Ferghana.ru, agreed to carry the UKMK's response.

Kyrgyz lawmakers advanced a number of other bills during 2014 that would restrict freedom of expression or the operation of groups dedicated to protecting journalists' rights. One measure under discussion in the parliament at year's end would require domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that receive foreign funding and engage in "political activities" to register as "foreign agents." In October, a bill banning speech that promotes "nontraditional sexual relations" passed its first of three readings in the parliament. It carried a maximum penalty of one year in jail, and could be applied to journalists who report on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people in a "positive" way.

Existing laws on terrorism, extremism, and incitement of ethnic hatred are sometimes used against journalists and media outlets. In January 2014, Osh TV was accused of extremism for allegedly calling for the division of the country into two states. The comments were reportedly broadcast ahead of that month's mayoral elections, in which Osh's controversial former mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov, was defeated; Myrzakmatov was believed to control Osh TV. The station's director called the extremism investigation an attack on freedom of speech. However, the station was sold to a Russian businessman in April, prompting many employees to quit, then seized by the state in May on the grounds that the sellers had obtained it illegally.

Azimjon Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek independent journalist and human rights defender, remained in prison in 2014, serving a life sentence on charges of inciting ethnic hatred and complicity in the murder of an ethnic Kyrgyz police officer during broader ethnic unrest in June 2010. In June 2014, the Bishkek city court refused to reopen his case. Askarov's investigative reports had overturned convictions and cost several officials their jobs, and he was widely believed to have been prosecuted in retribution for his reporting.

Access to public information is guaranteed by law. Access Info Europe and the Centre for Law and Democracy consider Kyrgyzstan's access to information law to be relatively strong, despite some weaknesses, in their Global Right to Information Rating; however, the assessment does not examine the quality of implementation. During 2014, lawmakers and civil society groups were considering amendments to the law aimed at reducing the response time for information requests, among other changes. In October,

the activist group Movement-33 carried out a campaign in four cities to inform citizens about their rights under existing law.

All media outlets must register with the Ministry of Justice to operate. The approval process entails background checks on outlets' owners and funding sources, including whether they receive funding from international donor organizations.

Regulatory bodies displayed a lack of independence in December 2014, when they passed on an order from the prosecutor general's office that instructed internet service providers to block the news website Kloop.kg without the requisite court decision. The Kyrgyz authorities, allegedly acting under pressure from Kazakhstan, were attempting to suppress the site's coverage of a video in which Syrian-based Islamic State militants were shown training Kazakh children; Kloop.kg had refused requests to remove its report. The blocking order was withdrawn after several days due to the lack of judicial ruling.

NGOs that work to support freedom of expression operated in a generally more hostile environment for civil society in 2014. Analysts cited the "foreign agents" bill, the anti-LGBT bill, and related political rhetoric as signs of growing Russian influence in the country, which was in the process of joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. Hostility toward human rights groups has also come in the form of aggressive street protests and criminal investigations.

## Political Environment

The media in Kyrgyzstan often suffer from editorial pressure from private owners or the authorities, as well as a lack of diversity with respect to language and viewpoints. A 2010 law converted the state media into a public-service broadcaster, known as the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation (KTRK). Its 15-member supervisory board is made up of media experts, journalists, cultural figures, and civil society representatives; the president, the parliament, and civil society each nominate five members. However, the parliament has the power to approve the five members nominated by civil society, and to dissolve the board if it is not satisfied with its performance. Although the KTRK has been airing more diverse content than before the reform, it is reportedly biased in favor of Atambayev and members of the governing coalition.

There are reports that the government occasionally pressures outlets regarding the coverage of certain stories, though media outlets anxious to avoid the ire of politicians will often issue their own directives to journalists. Some journalists express concerns about investigating sensitive topics such as government corruption, claiming that security services monitor their activities and contacts with foreigners.

Officials have also been accused of distancing themselves from the press, for instance by communicating with journalists only in writing or seeking to denying access to events. In December 2014, a deputy prime minister urged lawmakers to ban journalists from controversial hearings on the Canadian-owned Kumtor gold mine.

The government seeks to restrict access to content related to terrorism or deemed to incite ethnic or religious hatred. Although the law requires a court order to block websites on such grounds, the authorities have occasionally attempted to circumvent this rule, as with Kloop.kg in December 2014. At the same time, implementation of blocking orders by service providers is inconsistent in practice. Some 19 websites were blocked as of late 2014.

Access to a diversity of news sources, and particularly to minority-language media, remains a challenge in

Kyrgyzstan. Many Uzbek-language outlets closed down after the ethnic violence of 2010, though some new multilingual enterprises have recently emerged with the help of international funding, such as the television and radio broadcaster Yntymak (Harmony). In November 2014, a bilingual Kyrgyz-Uzbek newspaper called *Biz* (We) reportedly started publishing in Osh and Bishkek, with a circulation of 1,300 in each language. Still, international human rights bodies have repeatedly called on Kyrgyz officials to foster more privately owned media outlets in minority languages. The government's limited activity on the issue is reportedly linked to concerns about a backlash from ethnic Kyrgyz nationalists and renewed political interest in promoting a unified Kyrgyz identity.

Meanwhile, well-funded Russian television stations and other media are widely accessible in Kyrgyzstan. A 2014 poll sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development found that a Russian state-owned station was second only to KRTK in popularity, and had gained viewers at the latter's expense in recent years. Sputnik, the Kremlin's international multimedia news service, launched a hub in Kyrgyzstan in December 2014, offering content in both Kyrgyz and Russian.

No journalists have been killed in Kyrgyzstan in recent years, and physical attacks are relatively rare. However, reporters continue to face intimidation in the course of their work, and past crimes against journalists remain unsolved—including a brutal 2011 assault on Shohruh Saipov and the 2007 murder of his brother and fellow journalist, Alisher Saipov. In March 2014, blogger and human rights activist Ilya Lukash fled Kyrgyzstan due to threats from a nationalist youth group. In November, the offices of the opposition newspaper *Alibi* were ransacked by unidentified intruders who allegedly searched the paper's computers. A female journalist wrote in August about regular sexual harassment faced by women in her profession and in Kyrgyz society more broadly.

## Economic Environment

There are more than 200 traditional media outlets operating in Kyrgyzstan—including 159 newspapers, 25 television channels, and 26 radio stations—and 22 popular online news services, according to an October 2013 study by the Public Association of Journalists. The public broadcaster operates two television and two radio networks with national reach. Russian-language television channels are widely available and garner a significant share of the audience. However, conditions differ by region, and access to media outlets remains limited in rural areas.

An independent printing press run by the Media Support Center, a local NGO, surpassed the state-run printing house, Uchkun, as the country's leading newspaper publisher several years ago. State-owned media outlets benefit from government subsidies. However, the ability of authorities to use advertising to influence media content has receded as more private sources of advertising revenue have become available. International donor funding also plays an important role, particularly for public, regional, and minority-language media.

In September 2012, Kyrgyzstan began a program to switch to digital broadcasting and stopped issuing licenses for analog television stations. The process continued in 2014, with the goal of full digital conversion by June 2015. However, critics have expressed concern that the government has not allocated adequate funding for the switchover, leaving both public and private stations without the necessary resources.

While the majority of citizens continue to get their news primarily from television, internet penetration has been on the rise, exceeding 28 percent of the population in 2014. According to the Public Association of Journalists' study, new online media outlets are slowly emerging, and traditional outlets are building an

online presence, though a lack of funding for training and equipment, as well as low salaries for journalists, continue to hamper progress in this area. Internet news sites such as Barakelde.org, Akipress.org, 24.kg, and Kloop.kg; blogging platforms such as LiveJournal and Twitter; and forums such as Diesel.kg provide lively alternative news sources for those with access. In 2014, a group of young female activists began blogging about challenges faced by women and girls in Kyrgyzstan, a topic that tends to be neglected in mainstream media.

Further expansion of online media is slowed by lack of infrastructure outside towns and cities. Moreover, most users reach the internet through the state-controlled service provider KyrgyzTelekom, creating the potential for government influence over the medium. A growing number of Kyrgyz citizens access the internet through their mobile telephones, but a new law enacted in February 2014 required the registration of SIM cards, which curbs the ability of citizens to use information and communication technologies anonymously.